



“I’d Rather Be with Them Than Doing Anything Else”: Kobe Bryant’s Status as the MVP of Girl’s Dads

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Abstract

Over 40 years ago, Cazenave (1979) provided one of the first scholarly examinations of how middle-income Black fathers defined the provider role. Since that time, scholars have studied the realities of biological and social fathers (Coles et al., 2010; Connor & White, 2006; Hamer, 2001, 1997; McDougal III & George III, 2016; Ransaw, 2017), as well as the relationship between fathering and sport (Fletcher, 2020). This qualitative work examined the words the late Kobe Bryant (January 23, 1978–January 26, 2020) used to describe his role as father to four daughters. To determine the underlying messages behind Bryant’s words, I used Phenomenology as the theoretical framework. Qualitative analysis of the words featured in the *Insider* article, “Kobe Bryant’s 10 Most Touching Quotes on Fatherhood and Raising Daughters” By Emily Cavanaugh (February 25, 2020) revealed three themes: (1) Bryant made being a present father a priority; (2) Bryant publicly praised his late daughter Gianna and her sisters; and (3) Bryant saw himself as a role model to children. Most important, Bryant’s fame and status in professional basketball along with his narratives regarding being a father to daughters is a strong, enduring counter narrative to the “absent Black father” trope that is common in society. The work also discussed the reasons why in light of the rape scandal Kobe Bryant is a good role model. Implications for how fatherhood will shape the Bryant legacy will be discussed.

Keywords Kobe Bryant · Fatherhood · Girl dad · NBA · Phenomenology · Qualitative · Social father

Like the majority of people on the planet, I was deeply shocked and saddened when I learned of the death of the late NBA Superstar, Kobe Bryant (January 23, 1978–January 26, 2020). Kobe was with his 13-year old daughter Gianna and seven

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others, namely, Payton Chester, 13; Sarah Chester, 45; Alyssa Altobelli, 14; Keri Altobelli, 46; John Altobelli, 56; Christina Mauser, 38; and the helicopter's pilot, Ara Zobayan, 50, when, on their way to a youth sports tournament, they crashed into a mountain near Calabasas, California (Moon & Silverman, 2020).

Like most, I had never personally met Kobe, but felt a profound connection to him through my paternal uncle, Donald Ray Chaney (born March 22, 1946), affectionately known to me as Uncle Don. Uncle Don graduated from the University of Houston, drafted as a Guard with the Los Angeles Lakers (1976–1977), and went on to have two stints as a Guard with the Boston Celtics (1968–1975, and 1977–1980) (Wikipedia, 2021a). Growing up, my family and I had an annual ritual of viewing the most anticipated game of the year, the NBA Playoffs, which usually ended up being a battle between the two best teams in the NBA: teams that my Uncle Don played for, the Los Angeles Lakers and the Boston Celtics. Over the years, I have developed a real appreciation for Bryant's impressively steady skill on the court. For example, Bryant was the youngest player to start a game (18 years, 158 days) as well as the youngest player to score 32,000 points (36 years, 87 days) or 33,000 points (37 years, 138 days). In addition, Bryant was the youngest named to the NBA All-Rookie Team (1996–1997) and NBA All-Defensive Team (1999–2000), win the NBA Slam Dunk Championship, or be a 5-time NBA Champion (2000, 2001, 2002, 2009, and 2010) (Lakers Universe, 2020; Wikipedia, 2021b). This sports legend also made a name for himself off the court, most notably, winning an Academy Award for Best Short Animated Film, "Dear Basketball," On Sunday, March 4, 2018 (Oscars, 2018).

After his retirement from the NBA, Kobe was poised to reach a different type of greatness, especially in regards to cultivating the skills of women in professional sports. Instead of focusing on his numerous accomplishments on the court or the ones that he was in the process of developing off the court, this qualitative work will examine an aspect of Kobe's life that most do not immediately think of—the words that Bryant used to describe being father to four daughters. To determine the underlying messages of Bryant's words, I will use a qualitative methodological approach.

Goals of the Current Work

This scholarly tribute to Kobe Bryant has three major goals, and I use phenomenology to achieve these goals. The first goal of this work is to examine the words that Bryant used to describe his fatherhood identity. The second goal of this work is to examine the type of father that Bryant was to his daughters. The third goal of this work is to reveal how Bryant's conceptualization of fatherhood extended beyond his biological progeny. To answer this question, I examined the words that Bryant himself used in the *Insider* article, "Kobe Bryant's 10 Most Touching Quotes on Fatherhood and Raising Daughters" by Emily Cavanaugh (February 25, 2020).

Significance of the Current Work

The topic is important for three reasons. First, the current number of Black children born to unwed mothers has increased over time. In 1965, approximately 25% of Black children were born to unwed mothers, while during the 1990s, this number increased to 68%. In 2011, 72% of Black children were born to single mothers, yet today, 77% of African American youth are born to unwed mothers. Consider also that when compared with 23% of the general population, 67% of Black children will spend some part of their childhood living in a single-parent household (Parent et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to position Bryant's fatherhood within contemporary realities of Black fatherhood, more broadly. Second, in light of the negative stereotypes of Black men in the media (Welch, 2007; Bryson, 1998; Leverentz, 2012), this work provides a strong counter narrative by situating fatherhood through the words of Kobe Bryant. Thus, this work reveals the kind of father that Bryant was to his biological children. Kobe was the youngest of three children and had two older sisters, Sharia and Shaya, who were aged 43 and 42, respectively. With the exception of his father, females surrounded Kobe during his formative years. Thus, seeing the abilities of women in his family of origin and later in the family that he established as an adult with his wife and their daughters must have impressed on Kobe that females could be just as successful in basketball or life as males (Cacich, 2020). Confidence in what females could actually accomplish motivated Bryant, while playing with the Los Angeles Lakers and upon his retirement, to support his daughter's sporting events and future career goals. When speaking about the importance of fatherhood in Kobe's life, *Yahoo! Sports* columnist Dan Wetzel (2020) wrote, "Kobe Bryant died being a father. This isn't a surprise, because being a father had long ago become the most important thing in his life, even more than lifting the Los Angeles Lakers to five NBA titles and earning international fame." Lastly, this work examines Bryant's willingness to guide individuals who were not his biological children. While no one can deny Bryant's immense talent on the field, this work provides a positive narrative of fatherhood through the words of "Black Mamba." Given the aforementioned goals, the following three questions are foundational to this work: (1) How important was fatherhood to Kobe Bryant? (2) What was Bryant's style of fatherhood? (3) What responsibility did Bryant have to children who were not biologically his own?

In the section that follows, I place the goals of this study within the empirical literature by drawing attention to key works related to Black fatherhood. I start by discussing the general perception of Black males in the media. Next, I discuss fatherhood among Black men. Then, I discuss the benefits of fathers for Black girls and boys. Lastly, I will discuss the theoretical foundation of the current work.

Review of Literature

Extant scholarship regarding Black fathers is extensive and spans several decades (Abdill, 2018; Adams, 2019; Cazenave, 1979; Connor & White, 2006; Daniel, 1975; Hamer, 1997, 2001; Hutchinson, 1997; Kim, 2014; McAdoo, 1981; Oware, 2011; Prinsloo,

2006; Randles, 2020; Smith, 2008). Within this broad literature are numerous investigations of various aspects of Black fatherhood. For example, some works have placed Black fatherhood within an historical context, acknowledging how “the peculiar institution” negatively affected the ability of Black male slaves to be present fathers. In regards to this reality, Allred (2019) remarked, “The slave trade separated families at every stage, from the slave ships to the plantations. Since slaves were not allowed to maintain the basic family unit, fathers were robbed of their role and position in the family.” (p. 1). In spite of the immense social constraints under which they lived, Black male abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Martin R. Delany, and Henry Highland Garney used their platforms to advance civil rights and draw attention to their roles as husbands, fathers, and heads of households (Islam, 2019). Other studies have examined the relationship between fatherhood and sport (Fletcher, 2020), how men father in prison (Hairston, 2002), and the relationship between masculinity, race, and fatherhood (Lloyd, 2020).

Given the abundant scholarship on fatherhood, it is appropriate to examine what this construct involves. Hamer’s (1998) qualitative work revealed Black men and Black women have different views regarding what fatherhood entails. While Black women largely associated fatherhood with economic support, Black men generally related fatherhood to expressive roles that made it possible for them to be a role model, guide, and protector of their children (Hamer, 1998). On the other hand, other scholars have made a distinction between fatherhood and responsible fatherhood (Horn, 2018; Mincy & Pouncy, 2012). Levine and Pitt (1995) asserted that responsible fathers do four things. First, these men wait to have a baby until they are emotionally and financially ready to support a child. Second, these men establish legal paternity when the baby is born. Third, these men actively co-parent with the mother of their children, particularly in regards to the child’s physical and emotional care, from pregnancy onward. Finally, these men share with the child’s mother in the continuing financial support of their child, from pregnancy onward (Levine & Pitt, 1995). Thus, responsible fatherhood is a conscious acknowledgement that a Black male be emotionally, financially, and actively involved in the life of their child, prior to birth and during the entire life span.

The Perception of Black Males in the Media

Although fatherhood is an immense source of pride for many Black fathers (Baker, 2001; Franklin, 2009; Threlfall et al., 2013), society does not generally recognize Black men’s capacity or willingness to be fathers, which renders their presence invisible. In regards to this, Coles et al. (2010), wrote, “Indeed, if one judged by popular and academic coverage, one might think the term “black fatherhood” an oxymoron. In their parenting role, African American men are viewed as verbs but not nouns; that is, it is frequently assumed that Black men *father* children but seldom *are* fathers.” (p. 1).

While much attention has been given to the stereotypical images of Black women (Belle, 2014; Harris-Perry, 2011; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016), the assumption that Black men merely father children supports the cultural formula story of the deadbeat Black dad (Battle, 2018). Other destructive stereotypes erode the presence of Black

males and their influence on their children's lives. One of these roles is the "Tom," which is short for "Uncle Tom," and refers to a servile, docile, and simplistic Black man suffering from a cowardly disposition (Bogle, 2001). Another role is the "Buck," which refers to a Black man with a large body who possesses an insatiable sexual appetite and is most dangerous to White women (Bogle, 2001). Although some may regard the latter troupe as more egregious, both are destructive to Black fatherhood and undermine the stability of the Black family. While the "Buck" engages in "serial illegitimacy" or a pattern of sexual behavior in which he fathers children with multiple women to whom he is not legally married (Gary, 1981), the "Tom" has little regard for the welfare of this children and demonstrates this by cowardly abdicating the responsibility of fatherhood. These cultural formula stories are destructive to Black men for two reasons. First, these stereotypes make it possible for many to assume Black men are sexually careless and irresponsible, both before and after the conception of the child (Johnson & Young, 2016), and have weak and/or non-existent relationships with their children (Hamer, 1997). Second, these stereotypes ignore the countless Black males who are active, present, and responsible fathers (Levine & Pitt, 1995). Sadly, stereotypical troupes assume Black men are animalistic, are uncivilized, and lack discipline, self-control, and restraint. Furthermore, Black men are inherently unfit for the institution of marriage, which is generally associated with sexual monogamy and requires commitment to family (Randles, 2013).

Fatherhood Among Black Men

Over 50 years ago, Moynihan (1965) asserted Black single mother households socially devalued Black fathers, and rendered their presence invisible. Since that time, several Black scholars provided resounding evidence that in spite of economic challenges, Black men highly value fatherhood and frequently make numerous sacrifices to be actively involved in the lives of their children (Brooms, 2020; Cazenave, 1979; Coles, 2009; Connor & White, 2006; Hamer, 1998; McAdoo, 1981). Although fatherhood has morphed from the provider role to more (emotionally) expressive roles, Black men largely associate their manhood with the traditional provider role (Hammond et al., 2011). Essentially, the aforementioned studies demonstrate that Black men have a strong need to be steady wage earners for themselves and their children.

While many Black males are fathers to their biological children, others are social fathers "who provide a significant degree of nurturance moral and ethical guidance, companionship, emotional support, and financial responsibility in the lives of children." (Connor & White, 2006, p. 6). Thus, social fathers willing to fulfill a father role for children who are not biologically their own (Bzostek, 2008) are especially important to Black children, and may be grandfathers, uncles, brothers, cousins, new husbands and romantic partners of the mother, teachers, school mentors, coaches, and church mentors (Coles et al., 2010). Regardless of the form of fathering in which they engage, many Black fathers believe that their role is distinctively different from that of mothers and other individuals in the life of the child (Connor & White, 2006; Gary, 1981). One Black father used these words to describe

his position in his child's life, "So my role is to do what his mother can't or won't do... I take them to the show, spend time with him, get him extra things to make his life better... Then see, my biggest role too, is teaching him how to be a man, a black man...because that's something that his mother definitely cannot teach him... how to defend himself, how to act out here in the world, how to associate." (Hamer, 1998, p. 92). This comment suggests Black men see their contributions as distinctly different from those of mothers because they teach Black children to create their identity, protect themselves, and successfully navigate the world.

The Benefits of Black Fathers for Black Children

Research has demonstrated a myriad of advantages for Black children whose fathers (whether biological or social) are present (Baker, 2001; Blackshear, 2019; Clayton et al., 2003; Gunn, 2013; McAdoo & McAdoo, 2002). For example, when low-income fathers are consistently present, their children experience associated gains in cognitive and language development, academic achievement, and manifest fewer problem behaviors (Black & Dubowitz, 1999; Coley, 2001; Jackson et al., 2009). Black fathers also improve the emotional and social well-being of Black children. In their examination of the benefits of fathers for Black males, Zimmerman et al. (1995) found low-income African American boys' relationship with and emotional support from their fathers or father figures (both residential and nonresidential) predicted higher self-esteem, lower depression and anxiety, and marginally lower delinquent behaviors. A subsequent study with urban Black fourth grade children revealed that warmth and control from nonresidential biological fathers and other father figures was related to fewer behavioral problems and better peer skills in school, particular among Black children (Coley, 1998).

One recent qualitative study examined the role of biological and social fathers in the lives of Black Americans. McDougal et al. (2018) conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 African Americans who had social fathers. These men and women were asked why they began to recognize certain men in their lives as fathers or father figures, how they were affected by having these social fathers in their lives, and comparisons between their biological and social fathers. According to these individuals, collective activities, consistent presence, and meaningful communication were salient indicators that motivated them to regard these Black men as social fathers. Moreover, these men and women attributed their values, and knowledge regarding manhood and relationships to these Black fathers. Thus, this work provided strong evidence that a Black male does not have to be the biological father of a child to have a positive effect on that child's life (McDougal et al., 2018). Other studies have supported that Black youth benefit physically, psychologically, financially, emotionally, and academically when Black fathers are a stable presence in their lives (Blackshear, 2019; Durnell & Dlamini, 2018; Emory et al., 2020; Logan, 2018; Taysum & Ayanlaja, 2020). Essentially, these bodies of work provide resounding evidence that Black males play an important role in the lives of Black children.

Theoretical Framework: Phenomenology

Phenomenology recognizes that reality is not concrete or static and is highly related to individuals' perceptions of reality. Fundamentally, this framework studies human behavior with the intent of uncovering how people define their world based on what they say and do (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Since life is a social construction whereby people use language and their own personal experiences to shape their lives, a phenomenological approach respects the “actor” as the most valid source of information regarding his or her life (Cerbone, 2014). In regards to the current work, the language of Kobe Bryant provides a window by which we, as audience members, learn his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as a father. Since Black men define fatherhood in various ways, a phenomenological approach recognizes that what constitutes “reality” for Bryant may not have the same meaning or salience for another Black male “actor.” During his 20-year career with the Los Angeles Lakers, Kobe Bryant made several comments about the importance of fatherhood to him. Phenomenology's use of everyday knowledge (Garfinkel, 1967), “practical reasoning” (Pollner, 1987), language, and subjectivity will be particularly useful in this study.

Presentation of the Findings

Qualitative analysis of the narratives provided by Bryant revealed the following three themes: (a) Bryant made being a present father a priority; (b) Bryant publicly praised his late daughter Gianna and her sisters; and (c) Bryant saw himself as a role model to children. The “Bryant made being a present father a priority” theme relates to the value that Bryant placed on fatherhood, in particular the quantity and quality of time spent with his children. The “Bryant publicly praised his daughters” theme relates to the language that Bryant used to describe his daughters. In addition, this theme respects what Bryant taught his daughters. The “Bryant saw himself as a role model to children” theme relates to the ways in which Bryant helped build the character of his own children and other youth, more broadly.

Theme 1: Bryant Made Being a Present Father a Priority

This NBA legend was the father to four daughters, Natalia Diamante, 17, Gianna, 13, Bianka Bella, 3, and Capri Kobe, 7 months, and he greatly valued his relationship with them. This vibrant Black sports personality publicly shared his thoughts and feelings about being father to four girls, his tender nature with his daughters, and the ways that he increased the quantity and quality of time that he spent with them. For example, 2 years prior to his death, Bryant said the following during a 2018 interview with Barstool Sports, “I was sitting in traffic and wound up missing the school play. I had to figure out a way where I could still train and focus on the craft, but still not compromise family time. That's when I looked into helicopters to be able to get down and back in 15 min.” Through these words, Bryant makes it clear that missing his daughter's school play and his desire to “not compromise family time,” led to his seeking alternative ways to travel more efficiently.

Quantity and quality time were important to Bryant, and as an involved father, there were certain family traditions that he enjoyed with his family. During an interview with Entertainment Tonight in 2018, he said, “Every year, we go and watch ‘The Nutcracker.’ We try to make a gingerbread house, but my wife and the kids do a much, much better job than I do! I’ll put it that way.” When asked about the impending birth of his fourth daughter (his wife, Vanessa, was pregnant at the time) during an interview on the Ellen De Generes show on 2019, Bryant said, “I love having girls.” When asked about how he felt about the impending birth, Bryant said, “I’m super, super excited about that. [Vanessa] is as well. She wanted a boy so he can be mama’s boy forever—that sort of thing. We’ll see if I can deliver.” (The Ellen Show, 2019). In addition, during the “*All the Smoke*” podcast in January 2019, Bryant admitted, “I can be an absolute teddy bear when I’m at home with my family... with my kids enjoying that family time.”

After his retirement, Kobe did not plan to attend the season opener because he planned to attend the volleyball game of his eldest daughter Natalia. When *L.A. Times* columnist Arash Mikazi asked why he rarely attended Laker’s games, he smiled and said, “I have my routine at home. It’s not that I don’t want to go, but I’d rather be giving B.B. a shower and sing Barney songs to her. I played 20 years and I missed those moments before.” In addition, when asked how he prioritized time with his children, Bryant this comment to Mikazi, “For me to make the trip up to Staples Center, that means I’m missing an opportunity to spend another night with my kids when I know how fast it goes. ... I want to make sure the days that I’m away from them are days that I absolutely have to be. I’d rather be with them than doing anything else.” (*L. A. Times*, October 21, 2019).

Theme 2: Bryant Publicly Praised His Daughters

This dynamic NBA star openly extolled the intelligence, curiosity, and talent of his daughters. During 2018, ESPN reporter Elle Duncan was pregnant with her daughter when she had the opportunity to interview this force within the NBA. When Bryant asked her about the gender of her baby, Bryant gave her a high-five and then said, “Be thankful that you’ve been given that gift because girls are amazing. I would have five more girls if I could. I’m a girl dad.” In that same year, Bryant not only praised his daughter Gianna’s skill on the basketball court but also said that her skill eclipsed his own, when he was her age. During that same conversation with Duncan, Bryant said, “She’s [Gianna] a monster. She’s a beast. She’s better than I was at her age. She’s got it.”

During 2017, Kobe described what he loves most about watching his daughter Gianna {Gigi} play to the *Los Angeles Times*, “What I love about Gigi is her curiosity about the game. She’s very curious. Even in a heated situation in a game where it’s going back and forth, she can detach herself and come to me and ask a very specific question, which is not common” (Los Angeles Times, 2019). During 2018, Bryant was on *Late Night with Jimmy Kimmel* talking about what he and his wife teach their children, “We try to teach the kids what excellence looks like. We try to

give them a foundation of the amount of work that it takes to be excellent.” During the eulogy of her husband and daughter, Vanessa Bryant praised Kobe for his love and devotion to their four daughters. She expressed her feelings for her husband in this way, “Kobe was the MVP of girl dads—or MVD. He always told the girls how beautiful and smart they are. He taught them how to be brave and how to keep pushing forward when things get tough.” (Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2019).

Theme 3: Bryant Saw Himself as a Role Model to Children

This NBA force was a positive role model for children. When discussing the keys to his success, Bryant said the following to *USA Today* in January 2019, “You got to do what you love to do. I love telling stories. I love inspiring kids or providing them with tools that are going to help them.” Like many Black men, Kobe highly valued being a father to his biological progeny as well as being a social father, specifically a “Father Figure” to youth at Mamba Sports Academy (CBS, 2020). Chad Faulkner founded the Mamba Sports Academy in 2016. In December 2018, The Academy began a partnership with Bryant, thereafter, renaming the facility the Mamba Sports Academy. However, Faulkner realized that since there can only be one Mamba; it was time to change the name of the organization. In respects to his decision, Faulkner said, “One of the things that kept coming back to us is that Kobe is a, ‘one of one. As we were working here with his nickname of Mamba, that’s a one of one. And so we really felt that it was going to be in the best interest of everybody – including his family – to put Kobe in the rafters and those memories of where he belongs.” On May 12, 2020, the Mamba Sports Academy was renamed the Mamba & Mambacita Sports Foundation. The foundation, which is a part of the Academy, “provides sports education services to underserved communities and funds sports training opportunities for young women.” (Moran, May 12, 2020).

Discussion

This scholarly work examined the words that Kobe Bryant used to describe being father to four daughters. Phenomenology regards an individual’s own words as the most valid source of information regarding their lives because those words provide considerable insight into the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of that person (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Without a doubt, Kobe Bryant’s words provide strong evidence that he deeply valued his daughters and made it a priority to be a consistent presence in their lives. In particular, viewing “The Nutcracker,” making gingerbread houses, and viewing school plays were family rituals that Bryant valued. Consider that long traffic delays and missing school plays, not professional commitments, were the primary reason why Kobe looked into helicopters as a mode of travel because doing made it possible for him to “still train and focus on the craft, but still not compromise family time.” In addition, even though Bryant made his mark in the NBA, a male-dominated sport, Bryant valued the gender of his offspring. What I found especially touching is that Kobe did not say, “I love having children,” but rather, “I love

having girls.” Bryant’s love and appreciation for having daughters’ stands in direct contrast to cultures where male children are preferable to female offspring (Larsen et al., 1998; Loo et al., 2010).

Even though Kobe mentioned his wife wanted a son, he publicly honored the responsibility of molding the lives of his four daughters (National Geographic, 2021). I found it especially noteworthy the dichotomy that Kobe used to describe himself. Recall that he gave himself the nickname “Black Mamba.” According to The National Geographic, the Black Mamba is an African snake that lives in the savannas and rocky hills of southern and eastern Africa, known for its speed, lethal venom, and highly aggressive nature. Widely considered the world’s deadliest snake, Black mambas are shy and generally seek to escape when confronted, yet, when cornered, “raise their heads, sometimes with a third of their body off the ground, spread their cobra-like neck-flap, open their black mouths, and hiss. If an attacker persists, the mamba will strike not once, but repeatedly, injecting large amounts of potent neuro- and cardiotoxin with each strike.” While he was known for his aggressive focus on the basketball court, Kobe described himself as “an absolute teddy bear” when he is at home, enjoying time with his family. When asked how he prioritized time with his children, Bryant made the following comment to the Los Angeles Times, “I want to make sure the days that I’m away from them are days that I absolutely have to be. I’d rather be with them than doing anything else.” Through these words, Kobe makes it clear to the world that spending time with his children was the priority in his life. Most important, when he said, “I’d rather be with them than doing anything else,” Kobe makes it clear to his daughters and the world that he truly enjoyed spending time with his daughters.

Kobe Bryant Publicly Praised His Daughters

This NBA superstar openly acknowledged the accomplishments and the physical beauty of his daughters. By referring to Gianna as “a monster” and “a beast,” Kobe draws attention to Gianna’s curiosity and competitive spirit and thus allows her to carve out her own unique identity, separate and apart from him. While many fans believed only a son could further the Bryant legacy, Kobe verbalized confidence in Gianna’s ability to continue his basketball heritage as a female athlete, not in spite of being a female athlete. During an interview, Kobe shared the public’s tendency to minimize his daughter’s sports prowess and his own confidence in Gianna’s abilities. He used these words to convey his confidence in his second daughter, “The best thing that happens is when we [he and Gianna] go out and fans would come up to me and she’ll be standing next to me, and they’ll be like, ‘You’ve gotta have a boy, you and V [Vanessa] gotta have a boy. You gotta have somebody to carry on your tradition, the legacy. She’s like, ‘Oy, I got this. I’m like that’s right. Yes, you do. You got this.’” (Andon, 2020). Bryant’s confidence in his daughter’s ability on the court was evident when he dubbed her “Mambacita” (Mervosh & Bogel-Burroughs, 2020).

There are two reasons why Kobe’s acknowledgement of “Mambacita” especially resonated with me. First, Kobe acknowledged society’s assumption that only a male

could “carry on his tradition,” or perform to a level that would mirror his own sports accomplishments. Second, Kobe resisted this masculine assumption by emphatically mentioning three times, (“I’m like that’s right. Yes, you do. You got this.”) that he knows Gianna’s capabilities and abilities. Finally, Kobe fondly remembered incidents when he could quickly diffuse this masculine assumption by immediately drawing attention to Gianna, the daughter standing directly next to him who would carry on his name.

Kobe Bryant as Social Father

Through his words, it is evident that Kobe Bryant took seriously his role of biological father to four daughters and social father to many children not his own. For example, Kobe supported seven charities, and several of these charities, most notably After-School All-Stars, Cathy’s Kids Foundation, Make-A-Wish Foundation, and Vijay Amritraj Foundation, enrich the lives of children, both nationally and globally (Look to the Stars, 2020). In addition to his support of children and youth, Kobe became especially interested in the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) when his daughter Gianna became an avid player. During an interview with Barstool Sports, Kobe discussed whether females in the WNBA could transition to the men-dominated NBA, “There’s a lot of players with a lot of skill that could do it.” Further, Kobe went on to name three WNBA (Women’s National Basketball Association) stars he believed could easily make the transition, namely, “Diana Taurasi, Maya Moore, Elena Della Donne. There’s a lot of great players out there so they could certainly keep up with them.” (Trenaman, 2020). Instead of providing a generic response regarding the capability of females to one-day play in the male-dominated NBA, Bryant demonstrates a strong feminist stance by specifically naming three females whose skills currently enable them to enter that male-dominated space.

Kobe Bryant considered himself a role model and strongly believed celebrities should use their platform to be a positive example for youth and others. Not every NBA star, however, shared this view. Notoriously outspoken Phoenix Suns NBA star Charles Barkley declared that he was not a role model and believed it was ultimately the responsibility of parents to teach their children to emulate them, not athletes or celebrities. Boldly and defiantly, Barkley stated, “I’m not a role model...Just because I dunk a basketball doesn’t mean I should raise your kids.” When Barkley made this statement, it caused a national controversy, especially among members of the African American community who believed Black youth, who primarily grow up in mother-headed households (Damaske et al., 2017; Dickerson, 1995), especially need strong, visible, positive role models. In his memoir, *I May Be Wrong, But I Doubt It*, Barkley (2003) commented on the firestorm that resulted from his controversial statement, “The first time I got hit really hard was for taking that stance. There were some columnists that defended me but mostly I got killed. I’m okay with it, though, because nobody in all this time has been able to convince me that it’s wrong to tell kids to listen to their parents and not a basketball player they’ve never met.” (Eisenberg, 2019; Cited from Barkley & Wilbon, 2002). Some have publicly disagreed with Barkley. In the essay titled, *Are Athletes Good Role Models?* Dr.

Frank L. Smoll, a Sports Psychologist at the University of Washington wrote, “Like it or not, our society has a strong dependence on athletes as role models for children and adolescents....Athletes are role models whether or not they choose to take on the responsibility, and whether they are good or bad role models.” (Smoll, 2015). While Barkley placed the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of parents to rear their children, Bryant assumed the responsibility of being a positive influence for youth.

During her television show on January 28, 2020, Ellen DeGeneres opened her show by giving a heartfelt tribute to Bryant. When featuring NCAA Champion Arike Ogunbowale on her show, DeGeneres surprised this young athlete by inviting Kobe to congratulate her. When Ellen asked Kobe, “Did you get one of these ever?” [Referring to Ogunbowale’s NCAA Trophy], Kobe quickly replied, “Never. Never. Never even came close to that. And I’ve also never hit a game winning shot to win a championship. You gotta understand....that’s like the picture perfect moment. As a kid you dream about 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, to win the championship and she actually did it.” He bought her a signed jersey and one of her dog (named Kobe) he wrote, “To Kobe, Bark with Force.” (The Ellen Show, 2020). When he was asked why he decided to come to the show and support the cause of epilepsy, Kobe said, “We all have a responsibility to help one another.” (The View, 2018).

This acknowledgement is not to minimize or ignore the negative press Bryant received during his life. Most notably, a white female worker at a Colorado hotel accused Bryant of rape (Stern, January 27, 2020). Although Bryant publicly admitted that he and this woman engaged in consensual sex, his admission of adultery and out-of-court settlement did little to erase the “dangerous Black Brute” label that many publicly attached to his name, even postmortem (Perrett, 2020). In spite of this accusation, Bryant and his wife Vanessa remained married and unitedly reared their four children. While some may wonder whether a man accused of rape can actually be a positive role model, I strongly believe that Bryant’s admission of the wrong [specifically, “making a mistake of adultery”] and repentance (i.e., no longer engaging in that behavior) are compatible with the Judeo-Christian belief of forgiveness (Bingemer, 2019; LExcellent, 2019; Roberts, 2020). In his essay, Dr. Smoll provided several criteria by which to determine whether an individual could be a worthy role model. He wrote the following characteristics of the role model,

- *Freely devotes time and energy to community activities.* The athlete makes appearances at neighborhood events, serves on local boards, works with charity organizations, etc.
- *Enthusiastic about being a role model.* The athlete welcomes the platform for promoting positive societal change—a willing crusader for good. Furthermore, the athlete uses the position to share messages of inspiration and hope—a selfless drive to benefit others.
- *Presents himself or herself in a realistic and responsible manner.* “I’m not a role model because I’m a superstar jock, but because I’m a great person.” The athlete also helps fans realize that he or she isn’t perfect. After all, role models are only people with weaknesses and flaws. They’re not immaculate idols.

Kobe Bryant was not a God nor was he perfect; however, Dr. Smoll offers several criteria to determine if an individual can be a positive role model. He first asks if the person influences the lives of individuals in the community away from the court. In the *Essence* article “10 Times Kobe Bryant Was a Star Off Of the Court,” Tanya A. Christian beautifully highlights numerous times when the NBA star inspired others. In 2007, Bryant became the national ambassador for After-School All-Stars, “an organization that promotes academic success for the country’s youth,” essentially teaching these young people to set professional goals for themselves and be future leaders (Christian, 2020). Later, Bryant donated books to LeBron James’s “I Promise School,” and the Asia Society named him a cultural ambassador and charitable diplomat for their country (Christian, 2020).

Next, Dr. Smoll asserts the person enthusiastically embraces being a role model and gives of himself financially and physically to assist people that look up to him. Kobe supported Stand Up To Cancer, raised money and participated in a Public Service Announcement (PSA) to raise awareness for War in Darfur, gave money to a girls basketball team in Roseville, California, and supported The Kobe Bryant China Fund. His financial contribution to a female sports team caused one 14-year old student-athlete to acknowledge Kobe’s contribution “gave the Roseville girls basketball more opportunities to get better and to get prepared for our season.” In addition to making substantial contributions to these charitable organizations, Bryant also gave his time to others. “According to the Make-A-Wish foundation, over the span of his career, the father of four personally met with over 100 children through the 501 nonprofit organization that creates life-changing wishes for youth with a critical sickness. Prior to retiring, Bryant would often invite children to games to reconnect, inspire, and provide an escape.” (Christian, 2020).

Finally, Dr. Smoll asks whether the person displays values, specifically honesty and determination that are inherent to being a good person. Kobe demonstrated both. First, rather than lie about having an extra-marital affair, he publicly admitted to his wife Vanessa and the world that he committed adultery. With his wife by his side during the press conference, Bryant tearfully stated, “I didn’t force her to do anything against her will. I’m innocent. I sit here in front of you guys furious at myself, disgusted at myself for making a mistake of adultery.” (Lapin, 2020). Second, his determination are evident through his securement of an Academy Award for Best Short Animated Film, “Dear Basketball,” becoming a founding donor for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, as well as his scandal-free life after the rape accusation.

Conclusion

When my uncle Don [Don Chaney] was at the University of Houston, he donned the #24 jersey. Now that the world has lost “Black Mamba,” the Los Angeles Laker has permanently retired his renowned #24 jersey. Although Kobe is no longer with us physically, his “Mamba Mentality” lives on and I have no doubt that when people view his interviews in the coming years, study his finesse on the court, as well as his commitment to philanthropic causes that improved the lives of others, he will

be a beacon of excellence for millions the world over. Kobe leaves behind a wife [Vanessa] and three daughters, who have the opportunity to remember fondly the hidden nuances of Kobe's life, or in the case of his baby daughter, to learn what made her father such a great athlete and inspiration to so many.

At the time of this writing, the world was approximately 7 months in the midst of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic for approximately one year and four months (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Even with the recent roll-out of several vaccines, society is adjusting to life after the pandemic (Branswell, 2021).. In light of the many ways that this pandemic has changed our lives, essentially forcing us to create "a new normal," I sincerely believe there is always an appropriate time to demonstrate excellence. I am confident that if Kobe were still with us, he would echo this sentiment. Therefore, regardless of what we are currently experiencing, we can come out of challenges better, stronger, and more disciplined people. As this paper ends, I want the reader to concentrate on the positive aspects of Kobe's life, creating and purposefully embarking on a life journey that would make him proud. The influential Black Mamba made it his life mission to "teach his kids what excellence looks like" by providing a stable foundation regarding the amount of work that excellence requires. Excellence is not easy, but it is most definitely worth the effort. When we live as Black Mamba lived, demonstrating excellence in every aspect of our lives, we become the beacons that honor and carry forward the legacy of Kobe Bryant, the MVP of Girl's Dads.

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